September 28, 1972

BEING A NISEI

First of all, I want to thank you for inviting me to be your speaker this evening, and I do feel honored that you are assembled here for this purpose. Growing up, and being, of a second generation of another race in this country is colored by the origins of my parents. This country, as you well know, has often been called "the melting pot." Perhaps, we should note at the same time that not all the differences have been melted down, that we each somehow retain something of our ancestry that makes us what we are, whether in physical features, with food likes and dislikes, ways of doing things, even in our feelings towards the world and its people around us.

In my reading, since I am a librarian by calling, I looked for a good definition of the word "race", since I would be describing racial, or ethnic, differences in my upbringing as an oriental on the West Coast. Stanley M. Garn, in his book Human Races, explained it very well. So let me share it with you. He states: "Human groupings of various kinds have been designated by the term race. Race has been equated with language, and that is the sole meaning of the 'Aryan race.' Race has been identified with religion, as in the case of 'Jewish race,' which in reality comprises a number of discrete populations, some quite unrelated to each other. National groupings have frequently been called races, especially in periods of intensive nationalism. While at times linguistic groupings and biological races may coincide and while religions or even national boundaries may delimit race-populations of various sizes, language, religion and national affinity are hardly measures of race. Race is a biological concept and races are biological units. Races, moreover, are natural units and not artificial assemblages created by selecting 'types' out of a population."

Garn also points out that non-biological uses of the term race by politicians and others, as well as obvious popular misuses, as in speaking of "the human race," have occasioned word substitutes. One such is "ethnic group", which properly means a culturally defined group, and this phrase he does not consider an exact semantic equivalent replacement.

So I thought about this, and then concluded that both terms would apply to me, as I could be tabbed as being of Mongolian origin by "race," and with a cultural background that derived from its own peculiar ethnic roots. Consequently, in the light of these distinctions, let me describe my growing up in a Japanese community in California, the customs that we observed in our family, the traditions that were handed down to us, and our relationships to other people in the community. But before I continue, perhaps, I should explain that my family differed somewhat from the other Japanese families I knew in Sacramento, where I spent my childhood.

Historically, the Pacific Coast drew towards its shores Asiatic immigrants, as the Atlantic Coast received European immigrants, and the Japanese formed one of the last, and smallest, of our immigrant groups. The first Japanese immigrants to this country were recruited by American employers to replenish the supply of reliable, energetic labor, which had begun to dwindle with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, on the farms, the railroads, the mines and canneries. Nine out of ten of the early immigrants were unmarried men from the farm areas of southern Japan. After settling here, they sent for wives from Japan and began to raise children, known as the Nisei, the second genereation. I am a Nisei, and my parents were of the Issei, the first generation. As the Issei established living here, hotels and boarding houses and small shops became a necessary convenience, as well as a profitable business for the people who undertook these enterprises. And the Japanese community where I grew up resulted from such a beginning.

Imagine, if you will, a far western city, the capital of the state of Califor-

nia, where a large section of it towards the river was almost completely Japanese. In my mind I can see the boarding houses for migrant laborers who followed the crops at harvesting times up and down the state; the drug stores where we could get Japanese patent remedies as well as legitimate medicines, with prescriptions filled by a Japanese pharmacist; hardware stores that stocked Japanese cutlery and honing stones and bamboo utensils as well as U.S.-made tools; dry goods stores that carried Japanese cosmetics as well as American fabrics; fresh fish markets, where we could buy striped bass or tuna to be thinly sliced to serve for dinner as sashimi, and Ivory soap; Japanese restaurants that attracted both Caucasian and Japanese patrons; even a hospital, named for the owner's daughter (Agnes Hospital) that was staffed by Japanese professionals, but the meat markets were managed by the Chinese. In this part of town lived not just the Japanese, though they were in the majority, but also the Chinese, the Mexicans, some Italians, and Negroes. To this day I like sweet-and sour pork, tortillas and tamales, pasta, hominy and cornbread! Our home was often the gathering place for children of other races, and they were made to feel welcome by our parents.

The Japanese language was heard everyday on the streets and in our home. We were taught to bow politely to our elders, whether we knew them by name or not, and to say customary greetings. The varying dialects of the language that we heard used by some Issei told of their regional origins in Japan, Mother would imitate some of the phrases and tell us what they meant in more conventional Japanese. Many of my Japanese friends came from families engaged in business or farming. My parents' background differed greatly from theirs. Mother had not been a picture-bride as a number of other mothers, but had known my father through her brothers in Japan. She came from a distinguished Samurai family and had received an education unusual for women of her day, since she had finished normal school, which was the teachers' college of that age, and had taught school for a while.

My father did not come to this country as an immigrant laborer, but as a student. He had completed high school in Japan, but on arrival in California, he once again enrolled in high school to learn the English language. Years later, when I was studying Scott's Lady of the Lake, Father picked up my book and expressed a strong distaste for that particular work, although he always enjoyed rereading Ivanhoe. I understood why when I saw the copy of the book that he had used -- with interlinear translations in Japanese in his fine hand. It is interesting to remember that in Sacramento, the Sutter Junior High School I attended was once my Father's high school. Mother came to California as a school teacher; and they were married in Butte County. They both spoke and wrote extremely well literary Japanese and expected us to speak courteously and correctly.

The girls in our family were given Japanese names by Mother -- Toyo, Hisa, Mae and Masa, all with specific meanings. But our brothers had American names, given by Father -- William, Roy, Howard, Joe and Lee. Father was so interested in American history that he named our twin brothers, who died in infancy, Benjamin and Franklin, and the youngest of the family was named after another historical personage whom Father admired, Robert E. Lee. Though I was the oldest of the children, my brother Bill, a year younger, was considered the chonan, the eldest son and heir.

What was it like to have been born in a family like mine, with the cultural background of my parents, in this country where standards of child-rearing were more indulgent and less rigid? Well, at times, it was downright tough! It meant growing up American by schooling and associations, but with an easily distinguishable oriental face, and conforming to customs and traditions and modes of behavior that our parents considered proper. I recall an essay that my younger brother Joe wrote about our Mother, and he described her warm, endearing qualities, but he ended his composition with the sentence, "But she is a hard woman'" His high school teacher was so taken by his concluding remark that she came to visit Mother, the latter a little embarrassed when she found out why.

Japanese families have been described as being vertical in structure, with the father in position of control and authority. And the traditional Japanese family was characterized by strong solidarity, mutual helpfulness, and a patriarchical structure. Family themes usually included filial piety, respect for age, hard work, duty, and obligation. As expected, we paid deference to Father because of his position in the family, but we felt that Mother, with her insight and imperturbable logic, was more than his alter ego. Mother's philosophy derived from Bushido, the Samurai code, and she emphasized honor, compassion and sensitivity to nature. Father stressed education, diligence in study, and perseverance, and my autograph book from my early school years has the quotation,"Where there's a will, there's a way", written by Father. They were both concerned for our education, which included not only schooling, but also an appreciation of beauty, character, qualities of the spirit, and responsibility. They provided an extensive collection of books for us, and time to read, and shared in our games. I am still mindful of two Japanese words in particular, giri, moral obligation, and on, meaning duty and responsibility, and fulfilling them, when our desires ran counter to them, sometimes caused rebellious feelings and protests.

Certain factors modified this patriarchical structure, one being that the Nisei children understood the American culture better than their parents. The children were citizens by birth in this country, while the parents were aliens. In the Japanese community, the Japanese family functioned more as a unit. The family was considered to be more important than its individual members, who derived their positions inevitably from the position of the family. Conversely, the family profited from the success of its members and was damaged by their failures. Family techniques of social control were firm and effective. Desirable behavior was strongly reinforced, both within the family and by the community as a whole. The behavior of any Japanese was held to be a credit or blot upon all members of the Japanese community. Therefore, family standards of social behavior were reflected in and reinforced by the whole community.

It is not surprising that such a social system -- intact family, prescribed roles, and a high degree of family and community reinforcement -- was successful in controlling the behavior of its members, who in turn was characterized by conformity and little social deviance. Desired behavior was, of course, not accomplished merely by exposing the children to correct models. Behavior was constantly rewarded, punished, reinforced, and reshaped by such parental techniques as emphasis on dependence, appeal to obligation, duty and responsibility, the use of shame, guilt, and community gossip, and finally, emphasis on ethnic identity.

The catch-all technique for reinforcing desired behavior in the Japanese individual was an appeal to ethnic identity. Many Nisei say that this appeal was only resorted to when an Issei parent did not know what to say, and it took many forms -- "Japanese boys don't cry," or "Good Japanese do it this way," or "Good Japanese don't even think about things like that."

My gentle, courteous Mother could be firm, unshakably so, when she had to be, but she must have despaired sometimes about teaching us certain ideals of behavior and manners. She would refer to us wryly sometimes as yabanjin -- her barbarians. One morning she taught me an effective lesson, when I was in a hurry to leave for school. If I missed the first bus, I would miss the transfer bus that would get me to the junior college in time for my eight o'clock class. So I gulped down my coffee and toast, picked up my pile of books and notebook, rushed through the hallway, kicked the door open and was almost outside, when I heard Mother call after me in firm, unmistakable tones, "Will you please come back here?" I answered, "Oh, Mom, I'll miss the bus." She simply repeated, "Will you please come back here?" So I reluctantly walked back to her, and when I faced her, she looked me in the eye and said, "Now you may go. When you reach the front door, open it with your hand, and before the door closes, catch it with the same hand so that it will not slam hard." I missed the transfer bus, to be sure, but that was an example of her correction of what she considered unladylike behavior. Since she

had a great sense of hhumor, I am sure that she had reason to smile to herself that day.

Growing up in a family like ours was also learning to make myself understood bilingually. Mother spoke Japanese to us, with a smattering of English words, but she understood far more of our English and slang than she would admit. Father spoke English to us because of expediency, and if we had anything vital to relay to Mother, beyond the scope of our conversational Japanese, he would translate for us. It was sometimes convenient to send Mother to the door to deal with a salesman. She would bow so politely and then say with much dignity, "No spik English." They would bow to each other and part in a friendly fashion -- while we who were hidden beyond the door would giggle and commend Mother afterwards with "That was fine, Mom!"

Both my parents enjoyed reading, and our home housed many books. Our Japanese friends considered it rather unusual that we had a set of English encyclopedia, the Harvard classics, dictionaries, other reference books, novels, and children's collection of poetry and prose. At Christmas, we were given books and toys, and also games that we were to share with one another; the books were our very own. Mother read widely in translation, and it was she who familiarized me with the names of people like Nietsche, Schopenhauer, Debussy, Chopin, Beethoven, Bach, Shakespeare and others. She amazed me one day, while I was still in junior high school, when she asked whether I had heard of Shakespeare's Hamlet, and of a certain speech of his that began, "To be or not to be." Then she proceeded to recite in Japanese, so beautifully, the entire soliloquy.

Father read in both Japanese and English, and so often he would borrow our novels to read. If he felt that Mother would also be interested in the book that he would be reading at the moment, then he would translate verbally for her each evening. She enjoyed his account of Forbes' Mama's Bank Account, but the Gilbreths' "Cheaper by the Dozen was a bit too close to her in reality. He would rummage in a second-hand book store on his way home from work and bring back copies of the National Geographic or, for me especially, books of poetry, some of which I still have. At the end of the week, he always picked up the newest issue of the Saturday Evening Post and a bag of the old-fashioned chocolate drops, and whoever of the children met him at the door was the first to be able to read the magazine. The candy was distributed after supper. At times, though he was practically mobbed at the door.

A hobby that Father cultivated, since his college days, was his oil painting, and this he maintained as long as I can remember, until his death, when unfinished canvases spoke mutely of his interest. The Crocker Art Gallery was but a few blocks from our home, so I would be delighted, if on an afternoon that he was home, he would ask me to go along with him to the museum. I would skip beside him, as I hung on to his hand, and at the gallery follow him quietly, as he wandered through the rooms and noted how a cloud formation was painted, what tints indicated a hillside in bloom, what colors stretched out the shadow of a mountain.

Another pleasure of his was the gardens in the front and back yards of our house. He never worked as a gardener for a living, but he spent hours in developing his chrysanthemums, grafting plants as he had learned from a friend, babying the growing things tenderly. Because Mother enjoyed the splashy colors of the sweet peas (but she considered the zinnias rather garish), one portion of the fence in the backyard was covered with sweet peas every spring. He also grew vegetables to add to the family meals.

In Japanese culture the woman is generally self-effacing and humble before her husband, and my sister-in-law from Japan, even after long residence in this country, refers to my brother Bill in conversation as shujin, the master of the house, and not directly by name. Mother, despite her innate grace and conformity to tradition, was not always that self-effacing. She could be blunt and outspoken when need be, and she was not easily swayed by the arguments of her "barbarians", but she listened to us. There were times when we called her the Court of Last Appeal, and she would smile at us, "That's all right . . . Mama right." Yet tradition bound her, because one spring morn-

ing, when Father was busily transplanting her favorite beds from the backyard to the front, she stood inside the screen-door to watch him. I overheard her say to herself, "Oh, that impossible man!" So I said, "Why don't you go and tell him to stop what he's doing, Mom?" She demurred, I couldn't!" So I volunteered, "You want me to go and tell him?" She looked aghast at me, "Oh, no, you mustn't."

While we were growing up, Mother and Father observed various holidays, Japanese and American, for us. On March 3rd, Girls' Day or Dolls' Festival, Mother would make a step arrangement of dolls in Father's office room, with the cherished Japanese dolls on top and our everyday dolls on the bottom. She would let us invite our little girl friends over with their dolls and serve us dainty Japanese confections that Father had had to purchase at a Japanese sweet shop. And on May 5th, Boys' Day, Father would erect a tall bamboo fishing pole near the top of our cherry tree in the backyard and attach five large paper carp which gulped in the air and fluttered high, one for each of his sons. The carp represented courage and perseverance in the face of difficulties as it fought upstream. Not many Japanese families knew what a turkey dinner was when I was a child, but we celebrated Thanksgiving Day with a turkey, but I think that Christmas and New Year's were the most anticipated holidays.

Most of the Japanese in our community made much more of New Year's than Christmas since they were Buddhists. Days in advance, Mother would have us help in the overall housecleaning, and she would start preparing foods that were special to the event. What was most meaningful to me during this holiday was the decoration that she would tie on to the two posts of our porch, an arrangement of pine, bamboo, and flowering plum. This arrangement, called Sho-chiku-bai, is customary in Japan, and the pine signifies longevity, the bamboo rectitude, and the flowering plum fragrance and grace.

And speaking of traditional foods, at dinner, all the family were present, with both Father and Mother seated at the head of the table. With our family, although Japanese foods were served attractively by Mother, Father had an international palate, it seemed -- so we might have for dinner Italian spaghetti, or Spanish tripe, or Mexican chili, or Chinese chow mein, or American hash. Yet these so-called foreign dishes were always served with steamed rice and Japanese pickles and relishes. Father was served first, then Mother, then my brothers in descending order of age, then my sisters, and finally myself, since I was serving, as the oldest of the girls. In many Japanese families, little direct conversation went on between parents and children at the dinner table, but at ours, since it was the one meal of the day when we could all be together, there was always lively talk, with Mother and Father participating. Incidently, even though I was the one serving the rice, I was expected to finish eating at the same time as the others, and with five hungry brothers passing their rice bowls to me for refills (sometimes I think it was a game!), I had a time keeping up with them and my own dinner.

As the years came and passed, we grew outwardly beyond the immediate family world, and our minds explored a more manifold existence, as time branched out into the surrounding sphere of schools and teachers and friends of other races. Eventually, as the older of us reached college age, Mother and Father decided to move to Berkeley, probably because Father himself had attended the University of California decades before. There were five of us attending the university at the same time, and President Sproul was so impressed that he wrote to Mother. They wanted us to be sure that we had purpose and direction in our education, but they granted us the freedom to select the major field of study. So it was that I majored in English and Latin, but the others studied for related medical fields. As it was, the girls became a librarian, a medical technologist, a hospital dietitian, and a social worker. Among the boys we have two clinical pathologists, a bacteriologist, a mathematician, and a jet supplies clerk at General Electric.

There was no well-defined Japanese community at Berkeley, and since housing restrictions existed against non-whites, we rented a house many blocks away from the campus. Here we lived until Pearl Harbor and its consequences focused on the Japanese on the West Coast

as a separate ethnic group, the target of the anti-Japanese movement during World War II.

There are other aspects of my growing up that I am sure that I could point out to you that made mine different from yours, unique because of the combination of the Japanese and American, all because of my being a Nisei. And I can appreciate now what my parents tried to hand down to us, as you yourselves are aware of your own heritage.